He Comes Up Smiling

By CHARLES SHERMAN

Illustrated by Ray Walters

"Sure," said the Watermelon. "Father used to say that manners didn't count any more than the good apples on the top of the box to hide the rotten ones beneath."

"I think your father was a cynic," said Henrietta sharply, into whose ears Billy had been recounting the sayings of the absent divine.

"Yes," admitted the Watermelon, "he was."

"Cynicism is a sign of failure," quoted Henrietta. "Surely your father wasn't a cynic."

"Yes, he was," declared the Watermelon, "and you didn't make that up yourself. You heard some failure say it. Father used to say, and he's right, that if a man reached forty without becoming a cynic, he was a fool and might better never have reached forty."

"Your father was a philosopher," laughed Henrietta. "I would like to have met him."

"I thought the papers said—" began Billy, in her slow, anxious way to get things right.

"Yes, they did," interrupted the Watermelon, "and they were right."

It was quite dark now. Bartlett stopped a moment while Alphonse lit the lamps, and then they went on and on, faster and faster, into the summer night. Once in a while they passed a lighted farmhouse and a dog rushed out and barked at them. Twice they whirled through small villages and the villagers, going home from church, paused to watch them pass and be swallowed up in the dark ahead.

The general had been worried for some time. They were apparently getting nowhere. He felt that he should have consulted the blue book. He was about to suggest that they stop and get the book from the rear car, when Bartlett waved toward the dark bulk of a house looming out of the night, some little way ahead.

"That's the place," said he. "We can spend the night there and get one of the best chicken breakfasts I ever ate."

The general looked at the place and rallied his sinking spirits. It appeared dark and he should say it was deserted, but Bartlett doubtless knew what he was talking about. The people probably lived in the kitchen. He was hungry and tired and the thought of hot sausages, bread and jam and milk and then a soft cool bed was nearly as good as the reality. He turned gaily to the quiet three in the tonneau.

"Wake up and hear the birds sing."

Bartlett glanced back and laughed. "Asleep, eh? We're there," he added, turning the car neatly into the open driveway. "Guess you won't refuse a good supper very strenuously."

The drive was rough and they rolled slowly up to a great dark house, standing on a slight rise of ground, a typical New England farmhouse, square and gaunt and unadorned, with a small front stoop and a long side porch. From the trees behind the house, came the dismal cry of a hoot owl, as the cars came to a rest, and an answering cry from the grove across the road.

"Ghosts," whispered the general.

"Oh, hush," pleaded Billy. "There is no need of fooling with things like that."

"This house ain't lived in," said the Watermelon, as he slipped from the car to straighten his cramped legs.

"Folks gone to bed," explained Bartlett cheerfully, since he was not the one who had gone to bed. "We will just have to rout them out."

He shut off the power and alighted from the car, pulling off his gloves. Alphonse came up in the other car and peered out at the dark, quiet, lonely house and shook his head with forebodings.

"There isn't anyone here," insisted the Watermelon, "asleep or awake."

The general climbed out. "If we had consulted the book—"

"My dear sir," interrupted Bartlett, a bit irritated, "the book could not possibly have told us that the family had moved since last fall when I spent two weeks here, hunting."

"Certainly not," laughed Henrietta, who spent a good part of her life steering with infinite care and constantly growing skill between the Scylla of her father's wrath and the Charybdis of the hurt feelings of those whom the general had offended. "This is simply one of the unforeseen misfortunes of the road."

"Besides," said Bartlett, "we don't know that the Higginses have gone!"

"Don't you see that there aren't any signs of life?" demanded the Watermelon. He had lived by his wits so long that he noticed instinctively the little things which mean so much and are generally overlooked. "If there was anyone here some window would be open on a night like this, wouldn't it?"

CHAPTER X.

The Deserted House.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" murmured Henrietta in the tones of the famous Watson.

Bartlett looked at the house and nodded gloomily. "I guess you are right. Funny they should have left without writing me about it. I have known them for years."

"I will get the blue book," said the general, with the calm satisfaction of one who at last come into his own. "We can return to the nearest village—"

"What do we want a blue book to do that for?" sneered Bartlett. "I should think two motor cars could do it, provided we followed the road."

"Hold on a shake," said the Watermelon. "I will get in a window and open the door."

"We had better not," objected Henrietta. "Wouldn't that be house-breaking?"

The general agreed. "Certainly. It is warm and we can spend the night outside quite comfortably if you do not want to return to the village."

Billy shuddered and glanced appealingly at the Watermelon. A deserted house was bad enough, but outside where the owls called dismally from the woods and where bats flitted by in the dark held possibilities infinitely worse.

"I have known these people longer than I have Billy," said Bartlett. "I used to come here when I was a kid. It will be all right to break in. They are like my own folks."

The Watermelon immediately jumped to the porch, disdaining the few steps, and disappeared behind the vines which covered one end and concealed the window.

Bartlett turned reassuringly to the general. "It will be all right, Charlie. Don't worry about it. Why, I've always called Mrs. Higgins, Aunt Sally."

Visions of hot sausages, bread and milk die hard when one is hungry and the general snorted. "That's all right. I am hungry enough to break into the Bank of England if it resulted in something to eat, but what can we find in an empty house?"

"Ghosts," said Henrietta.

Billy pinched her. "If you think there are ghosts in there, Henrietta, I simply won't go in."

"Certainly there are ghosts," said Henrietta. "There always are in empty houses. Where else do you find them?"

"We will return to the village," declared the general, "and get something to eat. I will get the book—"

"An empty house is better than the countryside," said Bartlett. "And we have plenty to eat in that basket Henrietta put up."

"If there is something to eat—" wavered the general.

A light gleamed a moment through the crack of the door and then the door opened and the Watermelon grinned at them in the light of a small smoky lamp he held.

"Where did you get the lamp?" asked the general as the Watermelon led the way in.

"Found it," said the Watermelon. "The place is furnished. The family is probably only away for a visit." He set the lamp on the table and from long habit wiped his dusty hand on his trouser leg. "I fell over everything in the room before I got next to the fact."

He glanced about with some pride and the others stood in a semicircle and stared around. The room was a typical country kitchen, a huge stove side by side with a large chintz-covered rocking-chair. A dresser for the crockery and a haircloth lounge took up one side. There was a center table with a red checked cloth, a few chairs and a sewing machine near the window.

Bartlett glanced around and at every unfamiliar object his heart sank lower and lower and his first sickening suspicion became a painful fact. He had never lived there. Everything was strange, the furniture, the rugs, the very shape of the room. Where were they? Whose house had they unceremoniously broken into? A clammy chill crept down Bartlett's back and his florid face grew still redder.

None of the others was noticing him. The general was prowling around to see that the enemy could not come upon them unawares. The Watermelon had lifted the basket on to the table and the girls were preparing gaily to set forth the repast, all three rummaging in closets and drawers for plates and knives and forks.

The general returned to the table. "All serene along the Potomac," said he, thrusting his hands into his pockets and peering into the basket with renewed hope. Henrietta smiled gaily. She had pushed aside her auto veil, her cheeks were flushed with the joy of the adventure and her eyes bright.

"Father," said she, "in all our lives, we have never had an adventure before, because you persist in using those blue books."

The general laughed and helped himself to a sandwich.

Billy opened the dresser and peered gingerly in, her small nose wrinkled for any unforeseen emergency. She had taken off her hat, and her soft yellow hair, bound back by a black velvet snood, escaped around her temples in tiny waves. Her eyes, thought the Watermelon, were brighter than the lamp upon the table and her laughing, kissable mouth redder than the crimson lips of the fair creatures in the gay calendars on the wall. Her hand upon the latch of the door was so near his own, that he was tempted to put his on it, but instead slipped his into his pocket with a delicacy he did not recognize in himself. She was a girl, young and sweet and attractive, and because she was attractive, she had been flung into the maw of the street, a victim of the age's insane desire for money and more money. Each dainty curl, each flash and disappearance of her single dimple had been reckoned as so much in dollars and cents. So the Watermelon put his hand in his pocket and only watched her with poorly veiled admiration.

"Do you know what I am looking for?" she asked, glancing at him, her eyes full of mischief.

"For the family silver," said the Watermelon. "We might as well take some souvenir of our visit."

"I don't believe the family silver is silver," said she. "I am trying to find a bucket which you can take to the well and fill for tea. It will give you an appetite."

"We will let Alphonse go for the water," said the Watermelon, turning over the articles on the dusty, crowded shelves. "The general sees to the cars. We will give Alphonse a chance to earn his pay."

"You should do something to earn yours," said she.

"What is mine?" he asked, trying to see into her eyes.

"We must find that bucket," said she, gazing innocently upward at the higher shelves. "I love to muss around among other people's things. They are so much more interesting than your own. I wonder why."

"We can't be amused with ourselves and our things," said the Watermelon. "We are too important. Father used to say nothing else was really important but ourselves and what affected us."

Henrietta, fussing with the alcohol lamp at the table, laughed. "Why didn't your father write a book," she asked, "a philosophy? It would have been a deal more interesting than James or Spencer or Decant."

"He used to say that a man who knew life never wrote about it. It would be too painful, it wouldn't sell."

There was a heavy step on the porch and Bartlett turned quickly with sickening fear. It was Alphonse come from putting the cars away in the shed beside the barn. Bartlett wiped his brow and swallowed heavily. This was terrible, this being in another man's house unlawfully. The utterly hopeless inability to explain satisfactorily took all one's nerves away. He glanced at the other four, merrily unconscious of his ghastly discovery, their thoughts filled only with the desire to eat.

"Billy," said he sharply, "what are you doing in that closet? Come away at once."

"I was only trying to find a bucket," stammered Billy.

"Those things don't belong to you. You have no right there." And Bartlett sternly and promptly shut the door.

Billy drew back hurt. "I don't see why it is so wrong to break into a man's pantry," said she, "after you have broken into his house. Besides,

Peered Gingerly In.

daddy, you have known these people all your life."

"That's the trouble," said Bartlett desperately, with a rush, "I don't know these people. I have never been here before." He glared defiantly at the general, daring him to suggest the blue book.

For a moment no one spoke. Alphonse at the door, hat in hand, the general by the table, another prematurely acquired sandwich in his hand half way to his mouth, Henrietta, busy with the flame of the tiny alcohol lamp, Billy before him, the Watermelon on the edge of the dresser where he had seated himself, all stared in dull surprise. The Watermelon broke the silence.

"Better to break into another man's house than have him break into yours," said he. He glanced at Bartlett with just the flicker of amusement in his mild gray eyes, thinking that Bartlett had got lost already, deliberately, with the intention of spending the greater part of the following day finding themselves, and so successfully passing one day of the seven. Bartlett glanced at the young man and flushed. It seemed to him for one fleeting moment that the youth with the sleepy eyes knew a bit more than Bartlett cared to have him know, cared to have anyone know, that he even seemed to suspect him of having got lost on purpose. Then the sleepy eyes turned again to Billy and the older man told himself that he was mistaken. He was growing nervous and reading his own intentions in every one's eyes. He strove to regain the mastery of his nerves by airy indifference.

"A slight mistake," said he.

"Ah, yes," said Henrietta, "as when you go off with another man's umbrella."

The general, with rare nerve, took a bite from the sandwich and laid it on the table. He drew his handkerchief and wiped his hands. "I will get the blue book," he began busily, his mouth still rather full.

"We don't need the blue book to tell us to get out," said Henrietta, a bit tartly. She looked at the dainty pile of sandwiches, the cold chicken, cakes and olives on the table with the wooden plates and gay paper napkins she had arranged for the coming feast and hesitated. She wished some one was courageous enough to suggest that they eat before they leave.

"Certainly not," said the general. "But if we had consulted them before we left—"

"Sort of in the fashion of an oracle," sneered Henrietta as she began slowly to gather up the napkins and the wooden plates.

"Tell me," said Bartlett calmly, impersonally, not as one desiring an argument, but simply as an humble seeker after knowledge, with no prior views on the subject, "tell me, can you never make a mistake if you have a blue book?"

"No," said Henrietta, "never. With the blue book one could go directly to heaven. It would be impossible not to."

Billy laughed.

"Billy would laugh at her funeral," said Bartlett coldly.

"We haven't anything to cry about," said the Watermelon, frankly unconcerned. "It's for the man who owns the house to do the crying."

"How did you get here?" demanded the general, as Alphonse went to get the blue book, for the general could no longer be gainsaid in his desire for his book. "Is this where the Higgins' home should be?"

"Why no, father," said Henrietta, "or it would be here."

"I meant, Henrietta, did we come the right way? If we took every turn and have come far enough and not too far, this should be the Higgins' house."

"It should be," admitted Bartlett. "But it isn't."

"Why not eat here?" suggested the Watermelon, unimpressed by the aspect of the affair as it struck the others. "We can hunt for the Higginses afterward. They ought to be around somewhere unless we're helplessly lost."

Henrietta smiled and took out the napkins she had laid back in the basket. "It won't take us long," she agreed. "We don't need to have any tea."

"No," protested Bartlett, glancing at the door and listening for the crunch of wheels on the gravel without, "no, we must leave at once. We aren't lost. The Higginses' is probably the next house."

"Suppose it isn't," said Billy.

"Just so," answered the general. "We will return to the village and put up at the hotel. It isn't late."

"It's half-past eleven," said Henrietta, glancing at her watch.

Alphonse returned, blase, indifferent. "There are no books," said he, devoid of all interest in the affair.

"No books?" cried the general. "Alphonse, what has become of them? Did you take them out of the car before we left?"

"No," said Alphonse, and violent, positive protestations could not have been more convincing.

"But where are they? I left them in the car."

"They probably fell out, father," said Henrietta.

"They have never fallen out before," snorted the general, with base suspicions against Henrietta.

"We can get another tomorrow," said Henrietta. "We will simply return to the hotel in the village for the night." And once more she replaced the napkins in the basket.

"Yes," agreed Bartlett. "There is a good hotel near the railroad tracks."

"Where are the railroad tracks?" asked the general, who had lost all faith in Bartlett's knowledge of the country. "We passed no railroad tracks."

"Just before you come to the village," retorted Bartlett, irritated as a badgered animal. "You have to cross them as you come up the main street."

"We crossed none," said the general, with the indifference of one who realizes that there is no more to hope for. The boat is sinking, let it sink. The last cent gone and the landlord coming for two months' rent. Let him come.

"No," said Billy gently, "we didn't father."

"Why, we did, we must have," protested Bartlett. "I always come here on the railroad train. They have to flag it, but it stops. Why, I know there are tracks there."

They were all gathered around the table, except the Watermelon and Alphonse. Alphonse still stood by the door, hat in hand. He was merely a paid hireling. His master's affairs were none of his. The Watermelon still sat on the dresser and swung his feet. The predicament was only one of the many he was more or less always involved in and not worth thinking about. Batchelor and the police did not worry him that night. It was too early.

"Why not eat something before we go?" he said. "We have been here about an hour now, and another hour won't make our crime any the worse."

"Yes," agreed Henrietta promptly, surprised at her own depravity. "Let's," and again she took out the plates and napkins.

"Suppose they come back," softly whispered Billy.

Instinctively they all glanced at the door, and Henrietta paused with her hands on the edge of the basket.

The Watermelon laughed. "You ain't worrying because you broke into another's house," said he. "What's fretting you is that you may be found out."

"It's awful," acknowledged Billy. "I

"It Will Not Do Any Harm," He Thought.

feel funny in my stomach and have creeps up my back."

"So have I," said Henrietta, and nodded grimly.

"Do what you please," said Bartlett. "But don't get caught."

"They won't come," said the Watermelon. "They have been gone for quite a time and aren't coming back."

"Ah, my dear Holmes," said Henrietta, "explain your deductions."

"They've been gone long because there is so much dust on everything and the house smells so close. They won't be back tonight because none of the neighbors have been in to leave anything for them to eat and there aren't any chickens in the chicken-house. Alphonse would have stirred 'em up if they had been there."

"Suppose some one passes and sees the light," suggested the general, tempted to the breaking point by the dainty supper so near at hand and the thought of the terrible apology of a meal they would get at the dilapidated hotel they had passed in the village. And above all things, the general loved his meals.

"We are at the back of the house and it is almost twelve. Every one is in bed and those who aren't are drunk and wouldn't be believed anyway."

"It's five miles to the village," added Bartlett with no apparent relevance.

"Aw, be game," encouraged the Watermelon. "Be sports."

"Just being hungry is enough for me," declared Henrietta, taking the last of the edibles from the basket.

CHAPTER XI.

A Night's Lodging.

The general hesitated. It was not lawful, not right. They had broken into another man's house and should leave at once. But all his life he had lived by rules and regulations, followed life's blue book as persistently and as well as he did the auto blue book. Now he was lost, the blue book was gone and there was an indefinable pleasure in letting go the rules and regulations that had governed him so long. In the warm July night, with the youthful, foolish Billy, and the irresponsible Watermelon, the general's latent criminal tendency came uppermost, that tendency in all of us once in a while to do wrong for the sake of the adventure in it, for the excitement and fascination, rather than for any material gain. In the experience of being in another man's house unknown and uninvited by the owner, of listening for the rattle of a wagon turning in at the gate, for the crunch of a foot on the gravel without, there was an exhilaration he had not known for years. He felt that a bold lawlessness which he had never had and had always felt rather proudly was only kept under by the veneer of civilization, was rising in him and that he was growing young again. He had always believed that if the occasion arose, he could out-raffle Raffles.

"It will not do any harm," he thought with the remains of his old conscience. "We will go directly after supper."

(To Be Continued.)